

Of Frames and Wonders: Translation and Transnationalism in the work of Janette Turner Hospital

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Janette Turner Hospital's collection of short stories titled *North of Nowhere South of Loss* was published in 2003, bringing together seven stories that had appeared previously and seven that were being published for the first time. A thematic thread running through the collection is the complexity and the challenge of cross-cultural communication and understanding in our globalised world. While these themes have been discussed extensively by Hospital's critics in light of the discourse of transnationalism, only occasionally has there been reference to the importance of language in her work, and very little has been said about it from the perspective of translation studies (see Astley as an exception). In this article I will focus on one story in the collection, 'Frames and Wonders', to demonstrate not only how Hospital explores the relationship between an Australian woman and a French man via their national backgrounds and perspectives, but how she explores the nature of their linguistic interactions and the negotiation inherent in their communication. In this sense her characters learn to question the extent to which they can understand and translate one another.

Interestingly, a lack of the 'translational' in discussions related to the 'transnational' is not restricted to Hospital criticism. As Sherry Simon notes, transnationalist discourse as a whole is lacking in studies on language (7), and as Maria Tymoczko suggests, some vocabulary used in translation studies should be re-assessed in light of contemporary ideas of transnationalism (226). This cross-roads between the two discourses has attracted attention in recent interdisciplinary scholarship (Cronin, Bermann) and by applying it as an approach to the work of Hospital we uncover not only a new way of understanding her writing but a new literary context in which to explore this developing field.

Translation and Transnationalism

Given the complexity of the discourses of 'translation' and 'transnationalism', it is worth beginning with some definitions, the key aspects of their interrelation and some introductory remarks on their application to the work of Janette Turner Hospital. Arjun Appadurai defines the transnational as a new type of nationalism which goes beyond territorial loyalty and which is the result of our exponentially increasing potential in global movement and access to information resources (8). More specifically, he discusses it as a rising awareness of 'originally national identities' or groups of people who, through forced or voluntary diasporas, have moved from their nation of origin to become part of a 'delocalised transnation' (172). As Rachel Trousdale explains, however, the concept of the nation-state is never far away from the transnational, referring to the position of Michael Peter Smith which 'insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies and national identities, even as these are often transgressed' (Trousdale 3). She goes on to note that this state of simultaneous reinforcement and transgression is only temporary, because the transgression will eventually be recognised and legitimised. The concept of the transnational can thus be seen as one step in a process of *moving* toward something else. This is further supported by Homi Bhabha's theory: using the metaphor of a bridge, he describes our transnational state of

diaspora as a place where crossings occur, but most importantly, as a point at which something new begins (5).

The field of translation studies offers several important ideas that parallel these definitions of transnationalism. Trousdale's idea of having it 'both ways' is reflected in Sherry Simon's approach to translation: using the metaphor of the bridge (again), Simon describes it as a simultaneous 'distancing' and 'furthering' practice which brings about closer understanding at the same time as it highlights difference (12-13). Like transnationalism, then, translation is represented as a process or movement which occurs *between* two states or entities. Maria Tymoczko also explores this idea of translation as situated 'in-between', however she posits that while it has been a useful representation in the past, it needs to be re-assessed. She says that imagining the translator as standing in that liminal space of the bridge does not account for the contemporary understanding of language as a system. In systems theory, when we move outside of one system we do not cross over into another, implying there is a space between, but we move out into an encompassing system. This means there is no space in-between because technically we are *always* inside a system (Tymoczko 223). Tymoczko's argument posits an alternative representation of translation based on *vertical* movement, rather than horizontal, and we can see this reflected in some approaches to transnational studies, for example in Bill Ashcroft's discussion of the transnation existing *within* the nation (147). The notion of different representations of movement is a useful one for the examination of Hospital's writing and as such I will return to it later.

The purpose of this movement is at the heart of another interrelation between transnationalism and translation. For example, Bhabha's approach to the latter parallels his own idea of the former as the state of moving toward something new: he explains that translation puts meaning into a state of movement, bringing the source text into 'permanent exile' (228). In this way, the text is moving from a point of origin toward something on the other side of the bridge, striving for that which is neither the source text nor an original work in the target language. Azade Seyhan extends this discussion of translation moving toward the new by noting how translators encounter 'spaces of untranslatability' between languages where there is inherent loss and potential gain (157). He argues that by highlighting these spaces translation can move us toward *new* understandings of how cultures and languages relate to one another. Thus according to Seyhan and Bhabha, translation, like transnationalism, is a process which creates meaning and fosters understanding at those points where more than one language, culture or national identity comes into contact.

Janette Turner Hospital

Within the above discussion of transnationalism we can contextualise both Janet Turner Hospital's position as a writer and the past criticism of her work. This will then serve as a springboard to a transnational/translational exploration of her story 'Frames and Wonders'. Born in Melbourne in 1942, she spent most of her formative years in Brisbane before working as a teacher or writer-in-residence in England, France, Canada and the US. In 1978 she received her first award for a story published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, and has since enjoyed success as an internationally-acclaimed author of several novels and short story collections, engaging with a wide range of discourses and contrasting the various Anglophone and Francophone environments she has experienced. She is currently living in the United States as writer-in-residence at the University of South Carolina. This background has resulted in varying claims about her national affiliations, from the unqualified 'Australian writer' (Jorgensen 1) to the 'expatriate Australian' (Petter 210) to the writer of multiple

national identities who holds a significant place in the Canadian literary heritage (Cameron 126). In response to these claims Hospital has expressed an ideology which resists national labelling, stating for example in her semi-autobiographical short story 'Litany for a Homeland' that 'no arts bureaucrat or ComLit satrap can stamp *OzLit*, *CanLit*, *FemLit*, *MigrantLit*, or *Displaced Person* on your visa' (Hospital 262). However, while she resists these labels, many of her characters and her narrative voice itself look to Australia as their home (West-Pavlov 145-6, Samuels 85), an observation which is reflected in her frequent commentary on feeling intrinsically drawn to her country of birth (Jorgensen 189). As a writer she thus portrays a simultaneous resistance to and identification with the nation, or that reinforcement and transgression as discussed by Trousdale, which is central to the concept of transnationalism.

Scholars such as Russell West-Pavlov, Thea Astley and Selina Samuels have addressed concepts of transnationalism in Hospital's work. Samuels contends that her displaced characters come to a better understanding of their identity, and in fact reach the 'creation of individual identity' through the very *collisions* they have with other people and cultures; that is, their crossings and meetings on that bridge are what create *new* understandings (88). West-Pavlov notes that in her work there is a tension between plurality and a drive for order and definitive meaning (145); in other words, the transgression of definitive boundaries is constantly at odds with the desire to retain them. As Astley shows, however, these boundaries remain 'dynamic zones of contact' for Hospital's characters (7). West-Pavlov concludes that the tension this creates is an unresolvable point of *conflict* that brings about the 'production of identity and knowledge.' In this way, he argues that Hospital's work can be seen as a 'tentative model for (inter-) or (trans)national identities' (144, 155). I aim to extend his notion of a 'tentative model' for transnational identities by presenting 'Frames and Wonders' as a 'tentative model' for the *relation* between the discourses of transnationalism and translation. Of the various interrelations discussed above, two in particular can be applied here: the spatial representation of movement and the creation of meaning through the negotiation of difference.

'Frames and Wonders'

A brief outline of the story's structure and narrative content will clearly illustrate its particular relevance to this transnational/translational approach. It introduces us to a contemporary Swann and Odette, a Frenchman and an Australian woman, and it follows two narratives: the first is set in the present where our protagonists are sitting in a café. We learn they are ex-lovers who have met up for a drink for old times' sake. They are bothered by a street photographer, whose photo of them looking at a photo of themselves sparks a conversation about a shared past experience and they lapse into an argument over the events that took place. At this point the reader is taken into the second narrative which is set in the past when the couple were still together and which follows the experience they are arguing about. They embark on a search for the King's hunting lodge they have found marked on a map in their cellar. Over the course of their search they share their differing opinions on love, identity, power, history and cartographic representation, most of which draw upon their different national heritages and many of which are challenged in their expression by a language barrier. At the conclusion of this second narrative the story returns to the first, so that the argument between the ex-lovers in the present frames the lovers' search in the past. Moreover, the differences of opinion explored in the framed narrative provide further detail on the differing perspectives expressed in the framing narrative. It is notable that in the past the couple are precisely situated in the region of *Le Forêt le Roi* in France and they are both

still in the process of learning one another's mother tongue. Their conversation switches between French and English but it is represented for the most part in English. This contrasts with the present, when the ex-lovers are not so precisely situated geographically and in fact the presence of the photographer keeps the focus very much on the two characters rather than on their physical surroundings. They now also appear to speak together in fluent French, though it is still represented almost entirely in English. Thus what Hospital has given us is a story which is both transnational and translational: on one level it explores a relationship between two individuals who identify strongly with their national heritages and whose arguments shed light on the relation between two nations; on another level it explores a relationship situated precisely within a given country at the same time as it looks back on itself from a non-specified location; on yet another level it explores a relationship which has struggled in the past with language barriers and which is now able to negotiate them, only to encounter the non-linguistic barriers of personal memory and perspective. These are macro-level observations; the interrelations identified above between transnationalism and translation can now be used to explore these elements in more detail.

The spatial representation of movement

As discussed above, both Bhabha and Simon use the image of the bridge to represent a horizontal crossing *between* two national identities or two languages and Tymoczko posits an alternative representation of translation in terms of *vertical* movement. On a level of structure, intertextuality and code-switching this alternative representation of movement is also explored in 'Frames and Wonders'. The story's 'narrative within a narrative' structure reflects on a macro level a vertical movement inward that gives the reader two perspectives on the couple's transnational relationship. This movement is continued through the division of the narratives into subsections, each of which has a heading that references a work of art, film, literature or philosophy. The heading sheds a certain light on the events taking place in that section and creates a dense intertextual web that encourages further movement inward toward new levels of perspective and understanding. For example, one section is headed 'Swann's Way', making explicit the Proust reference established in the characters' names. The intertext works literally, as we see the couple searching for the King's hunting lodge with Swann's 'finger on the old map', directing them to 'follow the road to here...' (Hospital 156). However, it also draws upon Proust's exploration of power relations because the section ends with Swann getting his way sexually with Odette, telling her to '*Tais-toi, Chérie*', and making love to her in the lodge. The notion of power between lovers can be traced through other intertextual headings such as '*Afternoon of a Faun*', referencing Mallarmé's poem about a hunt for virgins in the forest, and then '*After the Hunt*', referencing the painting by William Harnett which depicts freshly-killed game next to antique hunting instruments. Other notable headings include '*Woman Getting out of the Bath*' and '*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*', referencing the paintings of Degas and Manet that portray the vulnerability of a naked woman. Each of these intertexts present more material for discussion than I have room for in this article, but they serve to indicate how the story not only begins with a framing narrative and moves in toward a framed narrative for a second perspective, but it moves in again via intertextual references to establish a multitude of further perspectives. This structure, in short, follows an inward, vertical movement.

There is one reference which provides a particularly interesting example in relation to the vertical movement of translation. The second section of the story is headed 'This is not a sign', referencing René Magritte's *Treachery of Images*. Magritte's premise was that any visual representation of a thing is *not* the thing itself, simply because it is only a

representation. This can also be understood in light of Umberto Eco's discussion of the Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis, which posited that:

The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off: it is only changed from something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. (Eco 28)

The narrative section framed by this intertext performs in itself a sort of representation, as it moves the reader from the framing narrative in the present toward the framed narrative in the past. More importantly, it makes this move via two photographs which show Odette and Swann at a road sign during their search for the hunting lodge, and this road sign can represent Eco's notion of infinite regression as it is positioned within a regressing series of frames. It begins when Odette recalls finding the photos in an old book and her memory takes the reader back to her experience of looking at the photos, which in turn takes the reader back again to Odette's experience of having them taken. We therefore pass through three different frames of perspective, or representation, before reaching the sign—and with it, the framed narrative. The sign is then encased in a further series, as Odette recalls placing the photos between pages 56 and 57 of a book about a nineteenth century Frenchman's travels, the narrator of which was just at that moment giving his interpretation of the different eating habits of Australians. Thus, the photos have been framed within a cultural perspective. These pages, in turn, are framed within the 'red with bleached patches' of the book cover (149), which itself is framed within letters A-Z of the library shelf. Finally, Odette has been searching through the bookshelf ever since, but she has been unable to find the photos. Thus the photographic representation of the road sign is literally caught in an infinitely regressing series of frames.

Interestingly, the concept of infinite regression in Hospital's work has been discussed previously in relation to transnationalism, as for example when West-Pavlov addresses the clash between plurality and a hermeneutic drive, illustrating the infinite process of reaching for order and knowledge which transgresses boundaries at the same time as it seeks them. In the above example, however, the concept of infinite regression can also be used to explore how the narrative thematises translation. For example, the reference to René Magritte's premise encourages the reader to view the sign as something *other than* a road sign, and one interpretation could then be its homonym in linguistic terms. A linguistic 'sign' is a conveyer of meaning, and according to Roman Jakobson, 'the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign' (139). That is, any sign within a language can be translated into something, which can be translated into something, and so on ad infinitum. In deconstructionist thought, Derrida took this idea of the instability of meaning and posited that there is no 'transcendental signified', or ultimate meaning, but only the state of 'différance,' or deferring (125-6). This results in linguistic signs being shifted infinitely from one interpretation to another, positing the creation of meaning as a never-ending process. This was also an important concept in the work of Umberto Eco, who said that a text 'floats (so to speak) in the vacuum of a potentially infinite range of possible interpretations,' and that 'no text can be interpreted according to the utopia of a definite, original, and final authorized meaning' (2).

This linguistic understanding of the 'sign' could then be applied to the infinite regression of meaning found in Hospital's use of code-switching. In the dialogue between Odette and Swann an awareness of the process or movement of translation is often made explicit, for example when Odette calls herself and Swann 'old' and Swann corrects her with the French 'mûr' (Hospital 145); on one level these words or linguistic signs have comparable meanings, 'mûr' being a translation of 'old,' but if we back-translate 'mûr' into English, 'old' would be an inaccurate choice, while 'mature' or even 'ripe' would be more appropriate. If we continue the pattern, translating 'mature' back into French could bring us to 'adulte,' while 'ripe' would bring us to 'mûr' in the sense of a fully developed fruit. Thus we could potentially regress infinitely through a series of translations. Another example is a potentially infinite shift of meaning between aural signs. Swann describes Odette's face as 'the face of a *biche*' (150), or a doe, in the context of admiring her submissiveness. The aural and visual relation of the French word for doe to the English word 'bitch', however, suggests further layers of meaning in English. We could understand 'bitch' in the sense of extreme submissiveness toward Swann, or we could understand it in the sense of Odette holding up a certain aggressiveness, or power, over Swann. Then if we continued the pattern and back-translated it into French we would arrive at either 'chienne,' which reinforces the submissive role, or ' salope,' which reinforces the aggressive role. It is interesting to note that Hospital chose to use the French word here rather than the English, because if Swann had said she had the 'face of a doe' rather than the 'face of a *biche*,' the undercutting power implied through the aural connotations of 'bitch' would have been lost. Thus through code-switching the text highlights the translation process and its ability to defer meaning and allow for multiple associations between the French and English signs. Moreover, this reading reveals how the text represents the inward movement of translation and the impact it can have upon communication in transnational relationships.

The creation of meaning through negotiation of difference

The second interrelation between translation and transnationalism was discussed by Bhabha and Seyhan, who both refer to the process of moving toward a new understanding via a cultural bridge or a language barrier. On a level of structure, symbolism and character interactions, this process of meaning-creation is represented in 'Frames and Wonders'. It occurs first on a macro level: in the opening frame we see a tense conversation full of struggle and misunderstanding, with Swann commenting 'bitterly' and Odette replying 'wearily' (147). In comparison the closing frame reveals a much calmer dialogue interspersed with light touches and fond sighs (166). In both cases Swann refers to a sexually suggestive photo of Odette in the lodge, likening her to the King's mistress; in the opening frame Odette simply claims that the existence of this photo is 'impossible,' but in the closing frame she accepts the possibility with the qualification that she 'only look(s) that way in French' (167). To move between these two frames there has clearly been some sort of transformation during which Odette has reached a better understanding of where Swann is coming from, even though she qualifies it by pointing out that he is viewing her 'in French.' Ultimately, she has accepted the possibility of a new image of herself as suggested in the photo. Viewed in this way, the past narrative framed within their conversation shows Odette and Swann going through a series of transformations which help them adjust to their different perspectives. Therefore, their search for the lodge can be seen not only as an analogy for an inwardly regressing search for meaning, but it can also be read as an analogy for the recognition and negotiation of difference.

The road sign is significant in this analogy due to its role as a communication marker and more specifically, as a speech act. As Odette recalls the photographs of the sign, she remembers that on one side it welcomes the traveller to *Le Forêt le Roi*, and on the other it bids them farewell. Linguistically there is no difference between the two messages, as ‘the words remain the same...but a red diagonal line runs from the lower left corner...to the upper right’ (Hospital 148). That is, the semantics of the two sides of the sign are communicated through the contrast of letters and ‘slashed letters.’ Their meaning is explained: ‘The sign says: LE FORÊT LE ROI...the slashed letters mean: *You are leaving the village of Le Forêt le Roi*,’ which is an interpretation that would come naturally to anyone who has the appropriate cultural knowledge of European road signs. The image also suggests, however, that we could see this road sign as a symbol. As Eco explains, a symbol is something which is the remaining half of a whole, and which ‘performs its social and semiotic function by recalling the absent half.’ Thus the understanding of it ‘works on the basis of an established and recognised convention,’ just as here the ‘slashed letters’ work on the basis of recalling the letters on the other side of the sign (Eco 9).

Eco goes on to say that the symbol can also ‘encourage ...an interpretation... because incomplete’ (9), and this is what happens in the narrative as it goes on to list several other ways of interpreting the same slashed letters: ‘*This sign is inaccurate. It is forbidden to use these words. This village has been discontinued. Translation unavailable. Not to be read*’ (Hospital 148). Thus the image highlights how, if the perceiver is not armed with the appropriate cultural knowledge, the sign can be interpreted in so many different ways. We saw this illustrated above through the concept of the instability of meaning, but what is interesting to note here is the overall *negativity* of these different interpretations, and how they each leave a blank space in their wake. For example, the interpretation ‘it is forbidden to use these words’ silences the other side of the sign, leaving an aural blank space. The interpretation ‘the village has been discontinued’ erases the image of the other side of the sign, leaving a visual blank space. Finally, the interpretation ‘translation unavailable’ leaves a blank space in terms of meaning where the other side of the sign has been left untranslated. In this way we can understand the road sign both in its capacity to say so many things and in its capacity to represent the blank space.

It is important to remember that this metaphorical space created by the road sign occurs on the *borderline* between two regions, indicating both entry and exit. In this capacity, the road sign represents a space which simultaneously erases and creates meaning. This concept in Hospital’s work has been previously related to transnationalism, for example by Samuels and West-Pavlov: in their discussion of how *collisions* and *conflict* help characters come to understand themselves and others, they are also emphasising the *borderlines* where identity is both erased and created. It could be said of ‘Frames and Wonders’, however, that these points of contact are also examples of Seyhan’s concept of ‘spaces of untranslatability,’ where cultures find their points of unresolvable difference through the very act of translation, and thus come to a better understanding of one another.

To take a specific example, the question of untranslatability is explored through the ways in which Odette and Swann negotiate their cultural differences. For example, as they venture beyond the road sign, they come to the edge of a forest and they find that they have very different ideas about what the forest means. For Odette it is a place of danger and death, but for Swann it is a place of desire. These perspectives are fuelled by their cultural backgrounds,

as she is prompted to sing the Old English ballad about a doe who dies in the forest, while he is prompted to tell the French story of the doe who found a woman and a priest lying together. Having established their different views, they try to understand them: when Odette sings the ballad, Swann asks whether it is an 'Australian *chanson*' (150), to which Odette laughs and explains it is an English ballad, a 'train of association with the deer.' This is still not clear enough for the Frenchman and so Odette goes on to explain: '*Une biche*. It's a song about secrets and death in the forest.' Swann then understands, but later he returns with his own French interpretation: '...the forest is erotic...and so is death. And so is mystery' (151). While Odette had not seen it this way, she admits that her ballad includes 'two lovers,' and thus the translation of her cultural knowledge into his not only highlights their different perspectives but it allows her to see something new in her own.

As another example, Odette goes on to describe the common feeling between the French and English stories, but she can only find a French word for it: '*frisson*' (151). In other words, that central point connecting the stories has eluded her in translation. This is also illustrated when she cannot find the right word to describe her feeling about Swann's obsession with photography. He seems to care more about it than he does about her, and while he calls her feeling 'jealousy,' for her it is simply 'something shapeless and dark, like the black spaces deep inside the woods' (154). Rather than struggling to translate interlingually, here Odette struggles to translate her feeling into any language at all, and the image she gives in its wake is an empty space. It could even be that it was a deliberate choice on Hospital's part to use the words 'black spaces,' given their aural similarity to 'blank spaces.' These examples demonstrate a conflict of perspective which brings about something new, but what has been created in this case is unclear: it is an open question or even an interrogation. We could bring this back to our image of the bridge, which as Bhabha explains, not only allows for crossings back and forth but is the beginning of something else, something which is neither nation nor post-nation, neither source text nor target text, but something which cannot necessarily be understood yet.

Conclusion

In summary, 'Frames and Wonders' is a transnational and translational story which explores the interrelation between these discourses in two ways. First, the search for the King's hunting lodge can be read as a spatial representation of inward movement and infinite deferral, demonstrating Tymoczko's notion of the vertical movement of translation in a transnational world. Second, the search for the lodge can be read as the process through which two languages or cultures negotiate their perspectives, demonstrating the parallel between Seyhan's 'spaces of untranslatability' and the confrontation of transnational identities. Overall this brief analysis of 'Frames and Wonders' begins to outline a formal literary manifestation of the crossroads between transnationalism and translation, highlighting the paradoxes and the tensions inherent in their representations and their processes. This outline can also be extended to other work by Hospital as a means of exploring a new translational perspective on her writing.

Finally, it is an approach which draws upon an important contemporary and interdisciplinary field of debate, and I would position it specifically in light of Sandra Bermann's argument for an *awareness* of the increasing need to deal with more than one language in a transnational world. She reminds us that wherever this need occurs, there may be problems of 'misunderstanding, deception, inequality and linguistic oppression,' but equally there is 'hope for insight, reciprocity and therefore creative negotiation, if never perfect resolution, between

languages and peoples, between values, enmities and loves' (Bermann 8). These ideas reflect how Hospital can be approached within translation studies: already seen as a writer who deals with the issues and rewards of living in a transnational world, here she is also exploring the issues of misunderstanding, the linguistic and cultural reciprocity and the creative negotiation that are inherently a part of this world. 'Frames and Wonders' is thus a 'tentative model' for the increasing relevance of the translational in the transnational.

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